

THE FIVE CENT

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THE PRAIRIE WITCH.



Before the doomed man could do aught to save himself, that fatal crack had sounded.

CHAPTER I.

BLOODHOUNDS ON THE TRAIL.

FAR away in the southwest, not many leagues from the border of Mexico, the stirring scenes to be chronicled in this narrative were enacted. In this region the prairies stretch away, far as the human eye can reach, seemingly boundless in their extent; but on the west can be seen the distant peaks of the mountains, rising up, an hundred miles away, to prove a barrier to further progress in this direction.

To these giant elevations then the reader is car-

ried to witness one of the most thrilling episodes of border life, a human hunt.

The night was one of uncommon beauty. Venus led her troops of stars toward the western horizon. A moon, round as a burnished shield, was hung in the east, and slowly wheeled upward in her nightly journey.

Through the trees, where a gentle breeze rustled the leaves, already turning sere and brown through the action of an early coolness in the temperature, two men were hurrying, taking a course that led them along the foot of the mountains, which at this point were utterly unscalable.

Their very movements told that there was an incentive to their flight, such as had hastened their flying footsteps.

Both men were panting heavily, and as they came to a halt in a moonlit glade, the light revealed the fact that one of them was wounded, for his left arm hung limp and motionless by his side.

"Texas, do ye think we have guv 'em the slip?" asked the wounded man, with a touch of despair ringing in his voice.

"I hope so. Bless my ole hide if this hasn't been a tough time, Arizona. It looked like all was over with us when they shut us up in the

San Pedro black hole. Thanks to my old comrade, Bowie Knife Bill, we got out of that with our weapons. Then the savage critters guy chase, and have kept it up for hours till we're just tuckered out. I reckon that last dodge threw 'em off the trail, and in half an hour or so, we'll be drinking with the gang and laughing—"

Texas came to a sudden pause, and stood as motionless as though transformed into stone. As if in anticipation of the fun that would follow their arrival at the place which served as a rendezvous for the pirates of the plains, a grim smile had commenced to creep over the face of the border desperado, but when he brought his words to such an abrupt close, it appeared to freeze there.

He seemed to be listening for something that had caught his ear to be repeated, and observing the look of fear that overspread his face, Arizona, the more cowardly of the two, caught his breath.

"What is it?" gasped he, after half a minute had passed by without any change in the attitude of the other.

"It would be too cruel. It couldn't be so, but do you know, Arizona, I could have sworn that I heard—"

A second time the man came to a sudden pause, and the silence of death fell upon them. The night breeze blew with a stronger gust than ordinary just then, and carried to their ears the loud and unmistakable baying of a pack of hounds.

Never did criminals condemned to a speedy death, hearing the hammering of the men who erected the gallows, exhibit more signs of despair than did these two desperadoes fleeing from justice, when they caught this portentous sound.

They turned their pallid faces toward each other, and stood there until the breeze carried the dread sounds in another direction.

"Great Heavens, it is Colonel Scott and his blood-hounds!" gasped Arizona.

"We are lost!" cried the other.

It was a terrible moment. They stood as if craven fear had deprived them of the power of motion. Texas was the first to recover something like presence of mind.

"There is one chance left; do not waste another second, comrade, but follow me. At the worst, we can turn at bay and die like men. The creek—the creek!"

Texas started away as he spoke, completely ignoring his tired condition. Arizona comprehended what he intended attempting like a flash, and he hastened in the wake of his more courageous companion.

They ran as only men who are on the very verge of death can run, nor were the loud cries of the hounds, heard almost continually now, needed to urge them to greater speed.

The creek was, as Texas had affirmed, their only chance of salvation, for water alone could throw these terrible hounds from the trail. It was some little distance beyond, but with the hope of yet making their escape the two men went over ground quite rapidly.

Both of them were pretty thoroughly exhausted, and hailed the first glimpse of the creek with no little joy. It was a broad, but shallow stream, which could be readily waded, and yet the current was strong enough to wash out what marks they might leave to the sandy soil that composed its bed.

On the bank of the creek the two men came to a pause and looked around them. Texas was the more collected of the two, and a scheme came all at once into his head, whereby his own safety might be assured at the expense of his comrade. And yet he seemed to be acting square and above board.

"Arizona, we must separate, one going up and the other down. One of us will get off; the other—ugh! Come, take your choice and be quick, for those infernal hounds are drawing almighty close. Is it up or down?"

Arizona did not hesitate, for he knew which was the best route.

"Up!" he said, quickly.

A smile passed over the other's face, for he knew that several men were tracking them that would readily judge that the fugitives had gone up stream.

"Then down for me. Good-by, old hoss. Give the boys my regards if you get off, for one of us'll be crow's meat in less than an hour. I'll remember ye to the friends in the lower regions who have gone before, if I happen to be sent there. Farewell!"

While speaking these words, Texas walked a few yards along the shore, up the stream. This, although seemingly unintentionally done, had a shrewd object behind it. As he spoke the last word, Texas plunged into the creek, and made his way down.

A few minutes passed away, and then the bushes were violently shaken again. This time it was not a human form that appeared, but a gaunt shape of a dog. Another instant, and three hounds were in sight, running up and down the bank of the creek, and evidently badly discomfited because they could follow the trail no further.

One of them was a white hound, the other of that dingy hue peculiar to the slave-trailers of the south, their square jaws and glistening fangs giving evidence of their fierceness when they had slipped the leash.

Footsteps sounded close at hand, and this time the bushes were trampled down by a dozen panting men, armed with rifles of various makes and descriptions.

Colonel Scott, a fierce-looking man, with long whiskers and a fiery red face, called his dogs to him. Some of those present were hunters and trappers, and it was readily understood by all, that the fugitives had taken to the water.

The dogs were put to the trail once more, and as they followed Texas' tracks up the stream for several yards, it was plainly evident that those they sought had gone in that direction.

Poor Arizona! wily Texas!

Helter-skelter the border regulators went up the stream on both sides, and with the dogs in the advance. Presently the long bays changed into sharp yelps, and they knew the game had been treed.

The hunted man, thinking that in choosing the upper he had taken the safest route, had made good headway after his parting from Texas, and when the disappointed yelps of the hounds announced that they had reached the creek, he came to a standstill, with the water still above his knees, smiling at the expectation of hearing the howls grow fainter as the dogs and their masters hunted poor Texas.

When the contrary became true, and the sounds, instead of diminishing, increased in vehemence, accompanied by loud cries of encouragement from the wild hunters, the man seemed to be frozen with horror.

He realized that something had to be done, however, and leaving the water without any scruples, he dashed through the moonlit forest, with the faint hope that the hounds might not be on this side of the stream; and that his hunters would continue on their way up the creek.

That this was a vain hope he soon had abundant evidence, for once again the tenor of those savage yelps changed, and the poor wretch groaned in horror as he realized that they were once more on his trail, and bearing down upon him like so many thunderbolts forged by Jupiter.

He could hear their swift passage through the bushes, the withering leaves of which rattled when thus rudely disturbed, and as the sounds increased in volume, the heart of the fugitive sank lower.

At last there was nothing left for him but to turn upon the death hounds or else seek safety in a tree, which security would only be temporary, however. Texas would have attempted to kill the dogs, but this wretch was too much of a coward, and in another instant he was clambering up a tree for dear life.

Not a minute too soon, either, for the hounds came tearing through the bushes, and leaping upwards at the suspended man, came within an acre of burying their fangs in his hanging feet.

Arizona had just drawn himself up on the body of the tree, and was preparing to use his revolvers on the dogs below, when the *posse* of men, headed by Colonel Scott, came up.

The crack of a pistol greeted them, and the largest hound fell over dead, without even a yelp. Enraged at the death of one of his favorites, the colonel raised his gun and sent two bullets upward. He was a remarkable marksman, and the wretch fell out of the tree with both of his arms powerless.

The savage white hound made a terrible leap at the groveling rascal, and it seemed as though nothing could save him from the fangs of the brute, but just at that instant the voice of the colonel rang out sternly, and Prince crouched down in abject fear.

A dozen hands laid hold of the sorely-wounded outlaw, and he was quickly raised to his feet. Stern faces scowled upon him, and he read his doom in every countenance. Men of his stamp had a summary method of dealing with border desperadoes.

Arizona would have pleaded for his miserable life, but his tongue seemed to cling to the roof of his mouth, and he could not make an articulate sound, try as he would.

"Search him and secure the papers!" ordered the owner of the hounds.

The command was quickly obeyed, but no paper was brought to light.

"What has become of them, you dog?" demanded the colonel.

His fierce looks alarmed the fellow still more, and in spite of all his efforts, he could not utter a coherent word. His jaws moved like a rusty hinge, but the power of speech seemed taken from him entirely, and the more violent he became, the worse his difficulty grew.

"String the fool up; we've scared his wits out of him. Out with your rope, Davis, and hang him higher than Haman!"

"Mercy!" gasped the wretch, recovering sufficient speech to utter this cry.

"Mercy!" thundered the colonel; "ay, such mercy as you and your kind showed Tom Travis and Rube Snelling; the mercy you and your red-handed comrade meted out to the gentleman from whom you stole the papers he values so much. Up with him, boys!"

A strong pull of the rope which had been thrown over the limb of a tree, a gasping, choking cry, a murmur of satisfaction from the regulators of the border, and Arizona's quivering, kicking form was dangling in mid-air, with his arms hanging useless at his sides.

"Now, after the other, boys!" yelled the colonel, and the man-hunters, together with their savage dogs, rushed back towards the creek, leaving the dead hound and the dying horse-thief alone upon the scene.

But Texas had during this interval made good his escape.

CHAPTER II.

CORTINAS AND HIS BORDER RAIDERS.

THE glowing sun was just sinking behind the western horizon, and his genial light would soon give way to the darkness of night. Long, slanting arrows, seemingly of burnished gold and crimson, glanced athwart the summits of the rugged mountains, and shot eastward until merged into space.

It was at this hour that a body of mounted men came to a halt in the very midst of the wildest scenery imaginable. Huge, scraggy cliffs surrounded them on every side, which seemed insurmountable, and could, in truth, only be climbed by a laborious effort.

The spot was, by its wild and picturesque grandeur, worth the admiration it would have been sure to have excited in the breast of a painter or poet, but it aroused no such sentiment among the men who now gazed upon its beauties.

They were a motley company, some twenty-five or more in number, all told, and the majority of whom seemed to be natives of Mexico, judging from their yellow faces, and the garments which they wore. The others were about as ugly a set of ruffians as the sun ever shone upon.

There was a tall, military man at the head of them, whose fierce mustaches gave him a distinguished air, and which he continually twirled when excited. This was no other than General Cortinas, the terror of the Texan border, whose name carried with it visions of pillage and bloodshed.

He and his ruffian crew had not crossed the border on a mere marauding expedition this time; they had nobler game in view, and there was one among them upon whom the rest looked with mingled feelings of respect, admiration and pecuniary interest.

All but Cortinas.

He watched this individual as a wolf would the prey that was within his grasp, and which he failed to seize upon for diplomatic motives.

Coming to a halt in this gloomy valley, with the frowning cliffs surrounding them, the caballeros hastened to dismount and go into camp for the night. While some attended to the building of a fire, others looked after the comfort of their horses.

Cortinas stood leaning against a shelf of rock, and watching the scene. His keen, coal-black eyes glanced from one man to another until they rested upon the person of whom mention has been made before. At a motion from his hand, this individual hastened to his side.

He was an undersized fellow, with a cunning face and bead-like eyes, deep-set in their sockets. It was not a physiognomy at all remarkable for an excess of either the good or evil of life; the man who bore it might have been a saint, or a fiend of the worst type, for all his face would have betrayed it without the closest examination.

His manner smacked of the servile as he bowed low before the red raider of the border, and ruffian as the Mexican undoubtedly was, he despised such a coward in his heart, though he might not scruple to make use of him. Bravery commands respect the world over, while cowardice gains the contempt it merits, and there is no one who can better appreciate true bravery than a man like Cortinas, possessed of reckless dash that would carry him through many desperate scenes, but wanting in the determined "grit" that makes the heroes of history.

"Senor Golden?"

"Yes, your excellency," replied the little man with the weazened-up face.

"I wish you to repeat your story to me, just as you told it before. No matter what my object may be, it is my will that you tell it. You have no objection, *hombre*?"

The question was put in such a fierce tone that the "comrade" to whom it was directed started as if he had been shot, and hastily replied:

"Not a bit, your excellency; in truth, I am always glad to speak of the subject, if only to show you that I am at least sincere, no matter what our expedition results in."

"It may not be so well for some one whom I know if it does not result satisfactorily. Proceed, senor, at the beginning, which I believe was at Matamoras," said the general, lighting a cigarette, and composedly smoking.

"In the gambling room I first saw you, general, and I knew I had found the man I sought. I do not profess to be brave myself, but I know a valiant man when I see him, and the border has rung for many a day with the deeds of Cortinas."

The Yankee flattery was beyond resistance, and under its magical influence the noted border robber actually

presented the other with a cigarette, and condescended to smile, even while he puffed out his chest, and assumed an additional dignity.

"Proceed, *hombre*," he said.

"When I had gained the attention of your excellency I told my story. I was a servant—a valet—in the employ of old Colonel Warden. He served in Texas, and against the Indians of the southwest, which would account for his having that paper in his possession. After his death I saw it upon the desk and made a copy of it, for I dared not steal the original. That paper professed to reveal the hiding-place of the old silver mine abandoned by the Spaniards hundreds of years ago, and known only in chronology, unless, as was strongly hinted, the secret is held by the Apaches.

"The colonel's son, Roger, believed there was something in it, for he began making preparations, together with a friend of his, for a journey to the mountains of Arizona. When I found what faith he staked upon it, I knew there must be something in it, for Roger is a clear headed, determined young man, so I concluded to make an attempt myself.

"The rest you know. We are now very close to the spot described, and if we can find the mine, our fortunes are made."

"You really believe, then, that we are in the neighborhood of the old silver mine, which I have heard old men speak of as something that their fathers had told them of?" asked Cortinas, the greedy gold gleam in his eyes betraying the desire of his soul.

"I do, your excellency."

"Enough. A short time will prove the truth. In the meanwhile, Senor Golden, I would advise you to always have a prayer on the tip of your tongue, for there is no telling what my men may do, should they fail to find what they have been led to expect. *Cospita!* they are a ferocious set."

The man with the shriveled face understood the Mexican's words. He moved uneasily, and glanced from the chief of the guerrillas to the men themselves. It had been very easy for him to comprehend the evil looks that had been bent upon him of late, because the search for the lost silver mine led them deeper into the wilderness without any tangible result.

Cortinas left him there, and strode among his men. He met them as an equal, but they did not attempt anything like familiarity, for the Mexican chief was quick to make and decide a quarrel.

The fame of this red tiger of the frontier was at its zenith at the time of which I write, and the border trembled at the mere mention of his name, which was synonymous with rapine and plunder, burning ranches, stolen stock, and dare-devil raids.

The man, Golden, had omitted to mention one little fact in his recital of the story, as to how he came into possession of the stupendous secret; but it did not matter, as the truth was already known to Cortinas. He had been disturbed while copying the document, and had failed to get the precise directions, so that there was a chance that they might fail to find the mine even though camping within a mile or so of it.

Cortinas was talking to one of his men, and engaged in an animated discussion regarding some object which the latter had discovered upon the face of the cliff.

The twilight had rapidly deepened into gloom, but the roaring fire started by the border raiders lighted up the bowl-shaped valley much better than it had been illuminated when they rode into it.

Even while they were gazing at this object upon the face of the cliff, a third of the way up, what was their amazement to see it move, and presently the figure of a man descended with no little agility.

What had he been doing up there? Cortinas answered the question to his own satisfaction as soon as the stranger

joined his men. He was an American, add therefore a coward. The brave Mexicans had come into the valley so suddenly that his retreat was cut off, and he had endeavored to escape observation by clinging to the face of the cliff.

"What shall be done with him, excellency? Surely we do not want him with us. The treasure will be small enough at any rate," said the second in command.

"Let him remain until morning; then take away his weapons, and kick him from the camp," returned Cortinas, carelessly.

"Furies! that would be cutting your own throat, excellency," hissed the voice of Golden, the Yankee, in his ear, "for that American is the man who holds the secret of the silver mine, and I believe he was hunting for the entrance upon the cliff.

CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE PRAIRIE PIRATES.

"*GREAT CÆSAR, looky thar, comrades!*"

Four men who had been seated beside a small fire, sprang erect as the words fell upon their ears. Intense darkness surrounded them, and the terrible hills, rising on almost every side, only served to make their gloom the denser.

Far up the ragged face of the mountain, a light was to be seen, moving along what appeared to be a narrow ledge upon the face of the most frightful cliff eyes ever looked upon.

The light proceeded from a torch, and this was not held by a man, for the person who moved along this narrow ledge was, without doubt, a girl. They could readily see her flowing dress, and the long golden hair that was moved by the current of air her own passage created.

The torch was held above her head, one bare, white arm was thus exposed to view, and the face which they caught a momentary glimpse of was also white, seemingly, as the driven snow. Even as the worthies glared in open-mouthed amazement, the phantom figure, torch and all, vanished from view, and darkness once more held sovereign sway in the lofty regions of the air.

For some time no man spoke, for the sight had stirred up whatever elements of superstition lay dormant in their hearts.

"Boys, am I alive, or is the coroner a sittin' on me?" at length asked one fellow.

The person referred to was a lantern-jawed individual, who had really once been the coroner of an eastern town, but in his eagerness to promote business he had gotten into trouble, and would have been hung for murder only that he skipped out in time. He had a mania for "setting" on subjects, and was not averse to supplying the corpse himself when the occasion warranted it.

The man who asked the question, and who had once more thrown himself beside the fire, was the most blood-thirsty ruffian who ever went unhung, and oh, horrors! he went by the sweet-sounding name of Tender-hearted Mose.

A third of the party was Texas, whom the reader has already become acquainted with.

Besides this there was a fellow called Hungry Mouth. They had a double reason for calling him this. In the first place, he was a notorious glutton, and could stow away more food at a sitting than three ordinary men. Then, again, his mouth expanded all the way up to his left ear, in which strange freak it had received material assistance from a keen bowie knife in the hands of an infuriated man.

The fifth and last of the party was the "Professor." He was a peculiar institution, indulging in lofty flights of rhetoric even when in the act of committing a murder. His efforts to be sublime in his oratory were simply excruciatingly ridiculous—no other words could express it so well—and his rough comrades, not having the patience of

Job, often interrupted his ethereal spurts, much to the chagrin of the adventurous Demosthenes Jones.

Surely such a villainous quintette had never before been gathered together, and Heaven help the man who falls into the clutches of these pirates of the plains.

There is one who seemed destined to test their hospitality, for while they sat there, holding an animated conversation, in reference to the strange sight they had just seen, a man came limping towards the fire, who seemed completely tired out.

The men looked up in amazement as he stepped into the circle of light.

"What ho, my good friends, can you accommodate a tired tramp by your fire for the night?"

The voice was bold and jovial, and there was a ring in it that made one of the five men give a start as though a shock of electricity had passed through him.

It was the professor who took it upon himself in elegant diction to answer the pilgrim that he was heartily welcome, and the others gave a muttered assent. As for Tender-hearted Mose, he was incapable of uttering a word, for there was something about the coming of this bold stranger that appeared to take his breath away.

There was a charming frankness about the manner in which this lone wanderer made himself at home that completely captivated all of them but Mose, and that worthy was too busily engaged in watching the stranger's face and catching his breath.

That fear was an element unknown to the composition of this pilgrim, every movement testified, and he met those rough characters half way in every joke and yarn.

The coroner was, therefore, not a little annoyed when, in obedience to a beckoning motion from Tender-hearted Mose, he was compelled to leave the others and join that worthy just beyond earshot of the others.

What Mose had to relate appeared to astonish the man very much, for his exclamations of surprise could be distinctly heard.

"It's him," said the man with a tender heart, as soon as the other joined him; "coroner, ye're in luck. Afore the night's over ye'll have a corpse to sit on. That man is our game, and I never seen a spider walk into a fly's web as nice as he's come to our'n. No huntin', no trouble, no nothin', only to make way with him during the night just as slick as fallin' off a log."

Who the "him" meant Mose did not say, but the stranger in the camp happening to glance in that direction a minute later, saw the coroner squatted upon the ground, and evidently comparing him with the card picture he held in his hand, while he nodded his small head as if convinced of something.

What did that strange smile upon the face of the stranger mean? Did he know that these rough men had been hired by his arch foe to put him out of the way, and knowing this, did he despise them so much as to trust himself in their company?

The hour grew later.

All this while the stranger had kept the men amused, and pretended not to notice the whispers that Mose indulged in with each of his comrades in turn, while in reality many of the words spoken under the breath of the conspirators reached his ear.

He had been showing unmistakable evidences of sleepiness for some time back, such as yawning and stretching, and at length, bidding the others good-night, lay down with his blanket over him, a little distance from the fire.

The others talked earnestly among themselves for some time, and at length with a great parade, the whole five of them threw themselves upon the ground.

Half an hour passed by.

The solitude was unbroken save by the cries of wild beasts, or the hum of insects, so numerous in the warm countries. They lay like so many men wrapped in slum-

ber, but one at least of the number did not even close his eyes.

From under his blanket the stranger was watching those whom he knew sought his life. One hand clutched a revolver, the other was ready to throw aside the blanket that covered his form.

Surely he had not been deceived.

The men lay like so many logs, void of motion. Still he watched them from the shadow of his blanket as a cat glares upon the tip of a rat's nose thrust out of a hole.

The fire had burned low, and was flashing up in fits. Ah! the bold stranger gave a slight start, and then lay quiet again.

Tender-hearted Mose raised his head, glanced keenly toward the spot where the lone traveler lay, then, growing bolder, quietly arose to his feet, and slipped noiselessly away under shadow of the darkness.

The form under the blanket moved uneasily, as if troubled by bad dreams. It so happened that these self-same dreams caused him to roll onto his back.

Ten minutes later a form crept out of the darkness and moved toward the sleeper under the blanket. It was Tender-hearted Mose. Between his teeth he carried a huge Bowie knife.

When within a yard of the sleeper he came to a halt, and arising to his knees, took the blade in his right hand. At the same instant, as if imbued with electric motion, the traveller suddenly sat up, and the frowning tubes of his ready revolver stared Tender-hearted Mose in the face.

CHAPTER IV.

FIVE HUNDRED GOLDEN ONZAS FOR A LIFE.

WHEN Tender-hearted Mose found the muzzle of a revolver staring him in the face, he became fiery red. Brave men turn white in times of deadly peril, but bullies change to the color of a turkeycock's head.

"Hold on, thar; don't shoot! I didn't mean anything, stranger," he ejaculated.

The traveler had gained his feet, and throwing his blanket over his shoulder, faced around so that he could have all the men in front of him. It was perhaps just as well that he did so, for two of the others had arisen, and seemed to be fumbling for their firearms.

"What do you mean by crawling up to me in that way, then? Explain, if you would not have me send a bullet through your head!" thundered the traveller.

Mose became a little bolder; that is, he got his lying apparatus in working order.

"Stranger, ye're too quick to take affront. I was scouting around and saw some signs of Indians. Then I remembered that pesky fine rifle ye have lying thar—I'd been a lookin' at it all evenin' an' wonderin' how it'd shoot—I'd be willin' to pay five dollars to have a shot with it—I war wrong, I know, stranger, but I determined to try it without your permission. I axes your pardon, and will you shake hands an' forgit it?"

Tender-hearted Mose could assume quite a hypocritical air, such as would have deceived many men. The traveller gave a laugh that contained strong elements of disbelief.

"With a knife between your teeth. Very likely you intended cutting my eye-teeth, but thanking you all the same, I have already gone through with that operation. Gentlemen, allow me to say, I know you."

"Indeed," said the professor, who stood with his left arm behind him, and the right thrust into the breast of his coat, *a la Napoleon*, only that this latter hand grasped a revolver ready for use under the coat, "indeed, my young friend, we are pleased to ascertain that under the circumstances you are acquainted with our ancestry. The name of Demosthenes Jones is not unknown in the world."

of science and *belles lettres*, and some time in the dim viata that stretches out in luminous folds before the retina of our orbs, the aforesaid D. J. calculates to carve for himself—”

“Shut up!” roared Texas, who could never endure the professor’s flights.

“—Carve for himself,” continued the indomitable individual with the swallow tail coat, banged up silk hat and long hair, “upon the tablets of time an immortal record that shall stand when the ages have swept the human race from the terrestrial ball, and left a howling wilderness where sweet plenty reigns. Yes, gentlemen, sooner shall these rocks fly from their foundations than—”

This time the professor caught sight of Texas moving his arm suspiciously, and in his endeavor to retreat backward, he fell over a stone, and vanished in a depression, swallow tail coat, silk hat, spindle shanks and all.

“Now,” said Texas, who had recovered his usual boldness, “I believe ye said as how ye knowed us. Prove it.”

“That is easy done,” returned the traveler, coolly; “you are called Texas, that man yonder Tender-hearted Mose, the next Hungry Mouth, that critter the coroner, and our professor of the dead languages is gathering himself up beyond. Am I right, Texas?”

“Korrect to a hair. Ye seem to know so al-fired much, perhaps you can tell us what we are doing in this far away place?” asked the outlaw, with a cold glance in his eye, for he had a suspicion as to what the answer would be.

“That is easily told; you seek a man, and that man is myself.”

It was remarkable to witness the boldness with which this was spoken; the man seemed not to know such a word as fear.

“Indeed?” sneered the coroner.

“Gentlemen, let us throw away the mask. I am Colonel Jack Crawford! It is war to the knife between us! You seek my life; you are hired to murder me. My mission to this country is no doubt in your possession, but let me tell you this: I knew you when I entered your camp; I am ready to fight you now or at any time you please, but you must understand that before he goes under, Jack Crawford is sure to leave his mark. Texas, what say you?”

“We must fight. Living or dead, your body air worth five hundred golden onzas to us, and we air bound to have ‘em. Kimrades, sail in; whoopee!” cried Texas.

Then ensued the wildest scene imaginable. Five men pitted against one; these five desperate, crime-stained border ruffians; the solitary man a soldier who could face the cannon’s mouth without blanching.

When Texas uttered what was intended as a war-cry, he and all of his comrades leaped forward toward the common center. Knives gleamed in the firelight, and the polished barrels of several revolvers, whose owners dared not stand still to aim for fear of attracting especial attention.

Crack!

The coroner’s arm dropped, and his gleaming blade fell to the earth. Two more reports came in rapid succession, the first being fired by Hungry Mouth and the other by the undaunted soldier who stood facing these desperadoes with a courage that stamped him a hero.

But for the fact that he carried a heavy wallet in the inside pocket of his coat, Jack Crawford would have been fatally hurt, but this saved his life in the most fortunate manner imaginable. Hungry Mouth was struck in exactly the same place, and not being the fortunate possessor of a wallet, he uttered a tremendous yell, and then tried his best to stand on his head, after which vain attempt he rolled over a decent corpse.

Before this, however, the others had closed in upon the soldier, and in spite of his strenuous efforts, it looked as though he was fated to succumb to brute force.

At this instant, however, a shout was heard close by, and the queerest form imaginable came leaping through

the air. The man was small in stature, and garbed in a complete suit of buckskin. Several coon tails floated from the back of his strange cap, which had a coon’s head upon the front of it, and perhaps fifty bushy tails had been fastened to his garments at every available point.

This strange being came forward, with bounds that equaled the leap of any tiger, the coon tails flying behind him, such was the rapidity of his progress. Before the combatants could well understand his presence, he was among them.

“Whoop! I’m a roarin’, tearin’ thunderbolt; I’m a scorchin’ from the equator. Look out, mister, or I’ll scorch your wings. Never heard o’ me, I reckon, but I’m the great and original Coon Tail Bob, a simoom from the ambrosial fields of Texas.”

“I’ll simoom ye,” howled Tender-hearted Mose.

He proceeded to put his threat into execution with such good effect that in precisely twenty seconds he was lying on his back, with one of the gaunt hands of the queer ranger clutching his throat, while the other aimed a revolver at the professor, who was cowering close by in momentary expectation of being sent to eternity.

Nor had Colonel Jack Crawford been less fortunate in his herculean task, for when the *finale* came, he was found sitting astride of Texas, while his seven-shooter covered the coroner, who crouched in a patch of withered grass, and clutching his wounded arm with his right hand, glared into the muzzle of the revolver as if a horrible fascination chained his eyes.

“Whoopee! I’m a roarer from the north; I kin crow, an’ kin get up an’ fly. Who hain’t heard tell o’ Coon Tail Bob an’ his pets. Thar’s Thunderbolt, my rifle, true as steel; Powder Flash, my hoss, swifter than any critter on the perairies; an’ thar’s Yellow Fang, my dorg. Lucky for ye, my beauties, that I set him to watchin’ the hoss afore I kin this way, fur the dorg never leaves go when once he gets a hold. Kurnel, how do. Can’t shake hands until we get rid o’ these reptiles, but I’m all fired glad to find you, for I’ve news that will raise yer ha’r straight.”

“I am anxious to hear it, Bob; you alarm me. But first, as you say, we must get rid of these hounds. I am a thousand times obliged for your timely assistance,” said the soldier, warmly.

“Say nothing o’ it, kurnel; I’ve seen ye fount afore, an’ I know ye cud hev made way with every one o’ these pesky wolves that feed on carrion if I had let ye hev the chance. I don’t know who they air, but they’d been mighty foolish in trying a pass with a man o’ your well known caliber. Do you think we hed better put ‘em all under the sod? I kin do it all-fired speedy if so be ye’d like.”

The cool manner in which this was said, caused a panic in the breasts of the four men, and they realized that it would not take much for the coon tailed hunter to give them each his quietus. One among them shrank from meeting the eye of the strange hunter, but there were reasons enough to make him shudder and wish the earth would open and receive him. But Coon Tail Bob did not pay him any particular attention, which act of courtesy on his part was duly appreciated by the shivering wretch of a coroner.

“That would be too close to murder to suit me, Bob, although I have no doubt that it would be justice. I know them, every one,” and the colonel arose as he spoke, picking up his elegant rifle and putting the strap over his arm.

“Gentlemen, you know me now. It would be a hazardous thing for you to attempt to follow us. Raise but a hand, and so sure as there is a blue sky above us, you die like dogs. I defy you and your employer. The five hundred golden onzas have slipped through your grasp. Remember what I said, for my words contain information, and this revolver—death!”

Colonel Crawford and Coon Tail Bob turned not their faces away, but backed further off from the fire, and in

another minute the darkness had engulfed their forms in its black depths.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEATH TRACKERS.

"MALEDICTION!"

The exclamation was followed by the sharp, quick crack of a rifle. A strange cry rang out, so eldritch in its intonation that one could hardly believe it came from a human being.

Above a patch of sage bushes a white cloud of powder smoke hung, telling the position of the marksman. On all sides save the west stretched the great prairie, with only these scattered sage bushes and patches of long, dead grass to relieve it from the terrible monotony that wearied the eye in ranging around.

A Mexican on horseback had come to a sudden halt. From him had come the exclamation, as he caught a gleam of steel behind a clump of grass, and realized that he was running into danger. Before the doomed man could do aught to save himself, that fatal crack had sounded.

The bullet must have struck him in the breast, for one hand was pressed convulsively against it, while the other arm was thrown wildly above his head, as he gave vent to that terrible scream. Then his horse started forward, alarmed by the shot and cry, and the dark featured Mexican fell to the ground.

Four human figures arose from their various places of shelter and started towards the spot where the dead Mexican lay. They one and all wore the buckskin habiliments of the genuine border ranger, and in the hope that the reader may recognize them as old acquaintances, I shall give their names without a personal description of these men, known upon the border to-day, quite as far as Texas Jack or any Buffalo Bill.

The man with the handsome face and drooping mustache, was, as the powder marks that showed so plainly upon his skin testified, dashing Blue Bill. Old California Joe, the sharpshooter, was present. Holding a smoking rifle in his hand as he advanced, which was conclusive evidence that the death shot had come through his instrumentality, was the famous Little Buckskin, and back of this fiery individual could be seen the towering form of Mexican Mose, dressed as nearly like the man who lay dead upon the prairie as they could make them.

The object that brought these four border heroes to the wild Apache country was a far different one from that which had attracted Cortinas and his band. They sought not for the fabled silver mine of the old Spaniards, but a deadly revenge.

Let their actions and words tell the simple but terrible story, and then it will be made manifest why the prairie rangers would have been willing to have tramped from the Rio Grande to the Red river of the north, should the chase lead them that far.

Upon reaching the spot where the Mexican lay, Old California Joe turned the body over with his foot, and marked where the fatal bullet had pierceed his heart.

"A good shot, Buckskin, a good shot. It is a fine opening. Do any o' ye know this critter?" asked the sharpshooter.

Mexican Mose bent over the still form, and a shade crossed his face.

"By my faith it is Red Monterey, as we called him years ago in Mexico. He had a hand in the death of my wife, so I heard, and I have prayed to be the means of his destruction, but it is all the same. Buckskin, take your trophy," said Mose, sternly.

The little hunter with the fiery eyes dropped his empty gun, and drawing his knife sprang to the side of the corpse. A few rapid slashes and he held aloft the dead man's scalp, or at least a circular portion of it from the crown of his head.

What frightful act of retribution was this, that rendered these men savages for the time being? Old California Joe took it upon himself to relieve his feelings.

"Boys," said he, taking the scalp in his hand, "this is a beginning, and before the end comes there will be a terrible death roll among the followers of the outlaw, Cortinas. The human fiends who murdered Don Pablo's family and our comrade, Buffalo Tom, shall die, every one, before we leave the trail. That's a long account between them and us, and we'll close it up by degrees. It may be a lucky thing for Cortinas in the end that he was not with his men when that foul act was done. That's one thing that goes agin my grain a leetle, and that is the selling o' these scalps to Don Pablo. Fifty dollars apiece are a nice little sum, but Ole Joe, for one, won't touch it."

"Nor I," ejaculated Buckskin.

"Count me in thar," said Blue Bill.

"I never had the remotest idea of taking it; but we will keep what scalps we take for the poor old don. He is nearly crazy now, and'll go stark mad when he finds that his butchered family are fully avenged. Boys, if ye had only seen that sight. I can never forget it to my dying day, and it makes a cold shudder run through me to think that such bloody fiends live, and walk, and have being like us. My eternal curse upon them. After that sight I could see every soul of the cowardly, butchering wolves, sunk to their necks in burning brimstone, and their cries would be music in my eyes. I am a man who fears the power of the Great Captain above, but when I see such terrible things on this beautiful earth, I come very near questioning the goodness and justice of His works."

Mexican Mose was usually a man of few words, and his comrades were all the more surprised at this ebullition of feeling on his part. The horrors that his eyes had rested upon can be better imagined than described, and it was no wonder that in his dealings with the red-handed fiends, he was as merciless as though his heart was of flint.

The four rangers had descried the horseman while he was yet far away, and before he could have distinguished them from the sage bushes and clumps of dried grass behind which they sheltered their forms. When he came near enough to them to make sure that he was one of the hated guerrillas on whose track they were following with grim death in their hands, Little Buckskin had fired the fatal shot that snuffed out the man's life with as short ceremony as one would use in putting out a candle.

Leaving the corpse upon the open prairie, just where the man had fallen when he received the fatal bullet, the rangers turned their faces toward the mountains, and once more resumed their tramp. Little Buckskin had secured the ghastly trophy to his belt, where it swung in full view, a terrible memento of the business that had brought these daring men up from Mexico on the heels of Cortinas and his guerrilla band.

Danger surrounded them on all sides, and none knew this fact better than the rangers themselves; but they were men for whom the word death possessed but little fear, and who had fought so often with the odds against them that they did not pause to count the probable cost, or the risk involved, when entering upon some new scheme of danger.

The hills that lay plainly outlined in the west were quite a distance away, but they hoped to reach them before the sun vanished entirely from view.

They were now in the heart of the Apache country. Should the smoke signals of warning be sent up from the mountain peaks that loomed up against the sky beyond the foothills toward which they were journeying, the vicinity would swarm with the dusky giants of the southwest, and they would find themselves in a pickle indeed.

The trail they were following so assiduously was that left by the silver hunters of Cortinas, and it would seem more probable that these worthies would be the first to meet the Indians.

That the Apaches would resist the invasion of their country by such a force of their enemies, with a desperate valor, there was no room for doubt, whether they knew of the real intentions of the treasure seekers or simply deemed it an invasion for conquest on the part of the Mexicans.

Among their towns the Apaches and Navajos have many Mexican women who have been taken captive from time to time, and either married into their tribes, or else made Princesses of the Sun, for the old Aztecs or Fire-worshippers were closely allied to these Indian tribes, as the construction of temples and houses in their towns testify, and many of their customs are similar to those which governed the strange race who held sway in the realms of the southwest at the time of the Spanish conquest, and even before the silver mines of such fabulous wealth were opened in the wild mountains by the descendants of Cortez and his men.

Many expeditions of retaliation had been sent out by the Mexicans into the heart of the Indian country, to the rescue of these prisoners, but when the terrible smoke signals went up, such a horde of fierce warriors gathered around them, that they thought themselves exceedingly fortunate if enabled to get away with even half of their original number.

From this it can be seen that Cortinas and his men were more than ordinarily valiant to thus place themselves between the jaws of death, that might snap upon them at any time, and all for the sake of enriching themselves from one of the ancient mines, worked by the Spaniards centuries ago.

It will also be seen that our four scalp-hunters were braver still, for they were fewer in number, but would have to contend with the guerrillas in addition to meeting the dangers that beset those worthies.

The sun had vanished behind the hills, falling like a meteor, as it seemed, such was the rapidity with which the dusk of evening came out from the shelter of the hills to meet them.

They were now close to the range where they intended camping for the night. In the advance strode Blue Bill, as he was the most experienced trailer of the four.

The hills were now only one hundred yards in the advance. Suddenly Blue Bill's voice rang out sharply and clearly:

"Behind the rocks, quick! the timber's swarming with the red varmints," and as the four men leaped for shelter the rattling discharge of guns awoke the wild echoes among the hills.

CHAPTER VI.

AN AVALANCHE OF FIRE.

IN the wilds where we have carried the reader, there are many evidences to be found of a gigantic upheaval of nature at some remote day. Among the mountains the rocks are almost universally cracked and burned as if from intense heat, which goes to prove that this region was at one time the heart of a volcanic country.

About one hundred yards from the foothills, there lay quite a chain of these brown rocks, some of immense size, and others not so ponderous in their proportions.

A prairie ranger is ever on the alert for danger, no matter how reckless he may be, and when Blue Bill's warning came, the others lost no time in springing toward the nearest of these boulders. As for the ranger with the powder marked face, he tripped upon some obstacle and fell flat upon the ground.

The others reached the stones in safety, although a leaden messenger came very near crashing through the brain of Little Buckskin, cutting a lock of his long black hair in its passage.

Blue Bill wisely remained where he had fallen.

Naturally the Indians thought he had been shot, and the

chorus of yells that arose must have proceeded from more than a score of savage throats.

Knowing that if he only lay quietly where he was there would be no immediate danger, he did not move from the spot at once. It would not be long before darkness would fully descend upon the scene, and then he could rejoin his friends or do just as he pleased.

When the firing from the trees had moderated in a degree, Blue Bill saw a human head poke around the huge rock near its base, which he suspected belonged to old California Joe.

The sharp-shooter must have had very sharp eyes to have discerned an enemy at such a distance, and with a background formed of the timber, but he certainly saw something at which to empty his piece.

A loud yell immediately succeeded the discharge that bore agony upon its very face, and was entirely different from the shouts that had before arisen.

"Good for the old man; he's a power behind a rifle, and no mistake. As soon as that firing's over I must join the boys, for I don't fancy being left out in the cold;" and Blue Bill crouched lower in the grass, as the Indians commenced a brisk fusilade, as if angry at the result of the sharp-shooter's shot.

When this slackened, he commenced crawling through the grass towards the rock. He was only a dozen yards from it in the beginning, and the others watched his progress anxiously, as they could easily see him.

The little journey was speedily accomplished, and Bill had joined his friends. After this the next thing on the programme was to leave their present quarters.

Which way should they go?

The timber was full of the red-skins, and probably, as soon as the night shaded their movements sufficiently, they would swarm out upon the prairie. Clearly, then, if they wished to avoid the savage Indians, they must take the back track for a time at least.

In short time Mose gave it as his opinion that they had better be moving, and this idea was immediately put into execution.

Dropping upon their knees, they crawled off in the dried grass. The night wind was blowing from the direction of the timber, but they could hear no signs of their foes, which was a sign that they were up to some mischief, in all probability crawling out towards the line of brown boulders.

They looked like so many specters as they crawled off through the grass, silent as death itself. What bothered them most was the fact that this event would throw them off the trail they were following so earnestly, and it would take some time to regain it. To what ends they would be put before that time arrived, the scalp-hunters had no conception.

Although they had followed them so closely, they were ignorant of the mission that induced the silver hunters to thus boldly invade the sacred domains of Apaches, and many had been the speculations of the four rangers, as to where Cortinas and his guerrillas would bring up if not annihilated by the horde of furious savages that would soon be swarming among the wild mountain passes.

After leaving the rock that had sheltered them from the bullets of the Indians, our four friends did not strike a bee-line for the open prairie; they were too shrewd for that, for by so doing they would remain in a line with their recent place of refuge for some time, and thus be in danger should the reds send any bullets in the direction of the rock.

Mexican Mose led them away in a line that soon took them out of range of any flying lead, and when this point had been secured, they turned their backs upon the hills, and made tracks.

They had gone perhaps three hundred yards or more, when a series of loud, angry cries were quickly succeeded

by prolonged yells. Their absence from the spot they had occupied had been discovered by the redskins.

Mose, in the advance, was heard to chuckle, as though immensely pleased over thus playing such a neat trick upon the heathens, and the others were ready to join in the chorus.

They were too close to the dangerous neighborhood to think of giving vent to their feelings, and managed to let off all superfluous steam after the manner introduced by Mexican Mose.

By this time, however, they were at a distance that would permit of their rising to their feet and making away at a faster pace, which was accordingly done.

They had gone some distance when the yells of their red foes once more broke out, and there was a tinge of malignant triumph discernable in the shouts, that made Little Buckskin, who brought up the rear, look back.

As he turned his head, a cry escaped his lips, in which surprise mingled with alarm.

"Great guns, boys, we're in for it now. The red fiends have set the prairie afire!"

The others turned at his words, but there could be no question as to their veracity. Even as their eyes wheeled around the half-circle, a bright flash lit up the timber as if by magic. Then they could see the dusky forms of their foes running along the border of the prairie in each direction, holding blazing firebrands above their heads, that made them look like so many fire fiends; and which they applied in a fresh spot every few seconds, so that it seemed as though there were already half a dozen fires, with the number constantly increasing; and as they radiated from the common center, they diminished in size.

It was a sight that, although grand enough, as seen in the darkness, would have paralyzed most men, could they have comprehended what a combination of circumstances was against them, as did the scalp-hunters.

The wind was blowing rather fiercely directly towards them, and in a very short time the mass of flames would be traveling twice as fast as they could go on foot. It would be useless attempting to get around it, as there were nine out of ten chances that they would be caught in a trap, and even if it was possible to avoid the flames, or break through the wings of the fire avalanche, they were pretty certain to find the redskins waiting for them beyond.

Every passing second rendered their situation more desperate, and the scene more entrancing, from a point of view where the terrible unites with the picturesque to form a picture of beauty. The flames were leaping upward towards the Heavens like mad creatures of fire, anxious to lick the blue vault, and from either flank the lesser fires were rushing onward, gradually uniting with the main one.

They were not over a quarter of a mile from the timber when the alarm came, and the furious flames had already advanced one-third of that distance. Escape was impossible by dashing through the billows of flame that roared and crackled, for they would have been roasted in a trice.

What under Heaven could they do?

Mexican Mose was a man of great presence of mind, and at this critical juncture an inspiration that was almost Heaven-born came into his head. They had a lone chance left.

"Follow me for your lives!"

Away the four men went over the prairie like crazy beings, while in their rear came the roaring and rushing avalanche of flame.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CAMP OF CORTINAS.

A STRANGER sat beside the blazing camp-fire—the same stranger who had so surprised Tender-hearted Mose.

He had sauntered, apparently unconcerned, into the

midst of the Mexicans, and taken his position among them.

Cortinas gazed darkly at him. The Yankee—the treacherous servant who was to guide the Mexican bandit to the buried treasure—crept softly up to Cortinas.

"'Tis he," he said.

"Who?" asked the robber chieftain.

"Roger Warden, the young American who holds the paper which will divulge the exact location of the treasure."

"How came he here?"

"I know not."

Cortinas smiled nervously.

"We will dispose of this fellow sometime to-night and obtain his paper. One of my men shall pick a quarrel with him, and then we shall lay hold of him. *Carajo!* it might do to hang him up as food for the vultures, for I hate him and most of his race. In the meantime, if what you told me about your parting with your master be true, you had better keep out of his sight," he said.

"I shall be very particular to do so; and as I owe him a grudge, I shall be glad to have a word with him—after you have made a prisoner of him," said the coward.

Cortinas smiled sarcastically, and then turned his back upon the Yankee, who quickly concealed himself behind a neighboring rock, feeling that the piercing gray eyes of the young silver seeker were fastened upon him.

The Mexican sauntered toward the fire and seated himself behind the others. His eyes occasionally ranged toward the stranger in the camp, and took in his personality.

Roger Warden was not a handsome lady's man, but there was something in the bold countenance that attracted universal attention. There were firm lines, betokening determination to an unusual degree, and the steady, piercing light that shone from his grey eyes seemed to pierce through everything on which they rested.

He was dressed half hunter, half civilized, and from his looks was the last person in the world anyone would deem a greenhorn. True, there were probably many things connected with border life that he had yet to learn, but he so adapted himself to everything that the absence of this knowledge could not be noticed.

Roger Warden was a brave man; moreover, he was a man of extraordinary nerve. To prove this latter statement it will only be necessary to state that he had recognized in the man with the leader of these ferocious-looking Mexicans, the servant who had been caught in the act of copying the secret paper that told of the old silver mine, and whom he had kicked out of the house in a fit of rage, this being the evidence Golden had had of his muscular power, and which made him fear his former master.

When Roger saw this consultation, he knew just as well as anyone did, that his life was in peril, but he preserved the same collected exterior, and conversed with the leader of the men.

Cortinas liked to joke a little now and then, and he amused himself in deceiving the young man (as he thought) with a long yarn. This, in a condensed form, was as follows:

He himself was the renowned fighter, General Canilles, and these men with him the flower of the Mexican army. True, they looked a little rough at present, but that was due to the lively times they had recently seen.

Men on the war trail could not spend time in dressing themselves finely and in polishing their *escopetas*. Such a war dog as himself cared more for glory than dress.

Of late the Indians had been committing serious depredations upon the borders of the magnificent nation, and various expeditions sent against them had met a fate that was too dreadful to dwell upon. In the end the government had called upon him as a war-seasoned veteran to punish these redskins, and he was on the way to do it.

All of which the young man seemed to swallow as

sweetly as if it were honey coated pills. He knew who this boasting general was from having heard his name mentioned by one of the men, and even at this early date in his career, the guerrilla chieftain had become famous as a bloodthirsty though courageous scoundrel.

Besides this, Roger's quick eye noted that significant points in the general's string of braggadocio would bring out laughter from his men, although they would look as sober as deacons when he turned his black eyes around as if inquiring into the cause of their merriment, for they feared him.

Tired at last of deceiving such a gullible victim the chief arose and sauntered away. Roger saw him speak to one of his troopers, a dark-featured fellow with an evil eye and a long drooping mustache, whom his fellows had addressed several times by the rather significant name of Bloody Tordas.

This man's face lighted up with a cruel smile, as if he enjoyed the instructions that were being given him.

That this was connected with him in some way the young man knew well enough. His situation was certainly enough to alarm the most valiant, but whatever he felt he did not show it in his face.

Five minutes later a man stumbled clumsily over him and fell to the earth. It was Bloody Tordas. As he arose to his feet, uttering a string of Mexican oaths, Roger realized what a trap had been set for him.

He also bounded to his feet, and seeing a knife flash in the murderous scoundrel's hand, he hastened to draw a revolver and spring aside at the same time.

Those who were quick enough to follow the movements of both men, saw Tordas raise his knife and half crouch as if for a spring. Had he leaped it would have been to his death, for the revolver in the hand of the young man covered him, and Roger Warden was not the one to miss his aim.

The shot was not fired just then, however, nor did the assassin make his leap.

A sharp, distinct twang, followed by a peculiar rustling noise struck the ears of the guerrillas just at this instant. They knew not from whence it came, and looked around them in every direction.

Then their attention was at once chilled by Bloody Tordas. He had uttered a cry that was more of astonishment than pain. His arm still remained aloft with the knife clinched in the hand, but it was not so steady now.

The face of the man was turned upward, and his eyes riveted upon his arm; as fast as the guerrillas looked, they uttered cries of astonishment.

At a point midway between the wrist and the shoulder, an arrow had been driven through with such force that the barb was as far from the arm as the other end.

The arrow was of delicate workmanship, and was feathered from the wings of the white crane. It was pointing downward several degrees, as though its flight had been through the air. Even as he glanced at it with blanched cheeks, a drop of blood crimsoned the feathered tip, and fell upon the upturned face of the Mexican.

Cortinas had seen more than the rest. He was standing beyond the circle of light, so as to be in a position to watch the fight without sharing its dangers, for he was a discreet man at times. He had heard the sharp twang, and with a hissing noise, something had shot downward between himself and the face of the cliff, lighted as it was by the fire that burned at its base.

Instinctively his eyes ranged upward immediately. When they reached the point just above the spot where the young man had been clinging when first discovered, the worthy general could hardly keep from uttering an exclamation of amazement.

The face of a white girl peered over the rim of rocks, as if she was watching the flight of the shaft that had shot downward with such unerring certainty. It was a marvel-

ously beautiful face, with a wealth of golden hair surrounding it like a halo.

Cortinas was enraptured, and when his men twisted their necks endeavoring to discover whence came that strange twang followed by the hissing noise, he was gazing entranced upon this lovely vision.

The conviction entered his brain at once that this was the witch he had often heard of, but always deemed a creation or phantasm of the narrator's brain. Seen almost always during the night, she carried a torch above her head, and by some was known as the Fire Witch, though associated with the tales of old rangers as the Phantom of the Prairie.

Cortinas did not move until the fair face with its wealth of golden curls had vanished. A bow in her hand had proclaimed the fact that from her had come the shaft winged with the feather of the white crane.

Then the cry uttered by the wounded man drew the attention of the guerrilla, and he saw the arrow transfixing his arm. Could such a frail girl send a shaft with such power to pierce the arm of a man through and through? It seemed incredible, and yet he must believe his eyes.

The men crowded around the wounded fellow, and one quickly exclaimed:

"*Carajo!* the bolt came from above."

They looked upward, some in fear lest a second arrow might follow the first, and others, with furious anger flashing from their black eyes, as if it would not take much to force them up the rough face of the cliff to seek the unseen marksman.

"*Carramba!* there is a paper attached to the shaft," cried one man, and he held up a small sheet with a ragged edge, and bloodstained in places.

"*Cospita!* gentlemen, where is your Americano friend?" broke in Cortinas' harsh voice.

They looked around. *Vamos!* the young silver seeker had mysteriously vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SNAKE-DEVIL OF THE APACHES.

CONFUSION!

The Yankee had seemingly taken advantage of their attention being directed to the wounded man, and had left them in the lurch.

A madder set of men it would have been hard indeed to find. Bad luck makes some men furious, while others it renders all the more determined. Cortinas laughed at the anger of his men, and cut their oaths short.

"Fools, have done with this. What would you have? The young Americano is no fool, and you left the way of escape open. *Vaya!* you need your eyes opened. Carlos, hand it to me," he said, harshly.

The guerrilla obeyed, and the general quickly opened the blood-stained paper. It was evidently a leaf from an old memorandum book, for its ragged edge told this much.

Written upon it in the purest Spanish were the startling words:

"The white men have come to their death. They will never leave the country of the Apaches alive. It is spoken by the Great Spirit. Even now the signal fires are blazing on the mountain that will call red men as many as the sands of the desert. It is spoken."

Cortinas read this aloud with no little amazement. What mystery was this? The writing of an educated Spanish lady, and evidently the diction of an Apache.

"What does it mean? Carramba! I am sorely puzzled. The girl, the arrow, the message, all connected with this silver mine which we seek. Demonio!" and he clenched his hand while his brow contracted.

A cry from one of the guerrillas at this instant drew his attention.

"Look!" exclaimed the man, "the paper speaks the truth. Yonder burn the signal fires. Jose Cardeau has seen them before, when only three men besides himself escaped out of a band of forty. Comrades, unless we leave this accursed country at once we are doomed."

Sure enough, by looking up the pass which they had made use of in reaching their present quarters, the summit of the great peak could be seen. Upon the very tip-top there burned three fires, that shot their crimson tongues upward like so many pillars of flame. It was a fearful sight to these men, who knew that now the signal had gone out that would environ them with a horde of savage warriors.

"Ha! what is that light in the sky over yonder?" cried one of the men.

Attention was directed to this new point, and many of those among the guerrillas who had lived upon the prairies, united in declaring that the grass had been fired, and that a conflagration was in progress.

Strange things seemed to be happening around them, and the most timid of the guerrillas began to wish they had never started on this unlucky expedition. The harsh voice of their leader recalled their wandering thoughts, and brought to light a new danger.

"Hark ye, my men," he said, in a stern voice. "We have immediate work before us which must be accomplished. I have reason to believe that we have found the famous old silver mine, that its entrance lies up yonder where the arrow came from. As for deserting me and my enterprise, let me see the man who dares. Is there one here who would turn back even if he could?"

Not a voice answered the thunder tones of the chief, and the only sounds that could be heard as he awaited for a reply was the trickling of the water in the creek near by, the movements of their horses as they cropped the particles of half-withered grass, and the groans of the wounded man, who still stood with the arrow transfixing his arm.

"It is well, comrades," gritted the determined man, "for the word that gave me answer would have been that man's death signal. Understand me, men. I am Cortinas. You gave me solemn assurances that you would go where I led, and I shall hold you to it. By my faith, the first who speaks again of retreating, shall feel the fury of my arm. We are here for a purpose, comrades, and that purpose shall be fulfilled if it be within the range of human possibility. Let the red fiends gather around us; we are not babies or cowards, and we will teach them a lesson they will never forget. Whatever may come, see to it that you remember Cortinas is your leader; he only strikes for victory, and death, as sure as if from a thunder-cloud, will be the portion of all those who fail him. Now, let us dismiss this subject once for all. We have business on hand. Comrades, are you ready and willing to trust in Cortinas?"

A chorus of exclamations followed, deep-toned and fierce; not a dissenting voice was heard; these blood-stained guerrillas were ready to follow the red border wolf wherever he chose to lead.

Whatever bad may be said of Cortinas to-day, his checkered life has shown that at times he evinced a recklessness that was little short of mad bravery.

He once more surveyed the wall of black rock, while the men looked first at the dark-red Heavens that told of the burning prairie in the direction their road had lain, and then toward the three pillars of fire on the mountain peak, that blazed so steadily.

They were, one and all, men who, in the company of Cortinas, had passed through many adventures, and were supposed to be bold of heart and utterly fearless; but there was something that made them look upon these sights with a foreboding of evil.

The three fires—they were, without doubt, the signals that were to beckon the great hordes of savages to where the intruders halted, but the prairie fire—it seemed as

though this was something done to cut off all chances of escape; a burning of their boats by the enemy.

Cortinas, however, did not suffer them to dwell upon this matter very long. He was a man of action himself, and not given to melancholy forebodings, thinking the trouble bad enough when it came, without having it magnified by imagination.

"Comrades, we must scale that cliff. It can be done easily, for the Americano was almost to the ledge where the girl stood who fired the arrow. Who will volunteer?"

A dozen men at once began the ascent, watched anxiously by their comrades below. The shaft that pierced the arm of Bloody Carlos had been broken in twain, and thus withdrawn. It had evidently been the girl's intention to shoot the arrow at the feet of Cortinas, when the menacing attitude of the guerrilla attracted her eye.

At first the wounded man was terribly alarmed lest the arrow-point had been poisoned, but one of his companions who professed to be a snake-charmer, and skilled in toxicology, assured him that had such indeed been the case he would have been dead long ago, for the poisons of the Apaches work quicker than the bite of a rattlesnake.

The cliff-climbers went bravely at their work, and as the face of the wall was rough, they found their task nothing for such expert men. Above them could be seen the ledge, faintly outlined by the flames of the fire. Cortinas ordered one of those near him to replenish the blaze with more fuel, and when this had been done it was much easier to distinguish the rocks and secure a firm footing.

"Carramba, beware!"

The warning cry came from the chief of the guerrillas. Those who were watching the ascent of their comrades gave a gasp of alarm. The most daring of the climbers, a swarthy-faced fellow, named Rodriguez, was already at the ledge. He had laid his hand upon the flat stone in order to pull himself up, and in another five seconds would have secured a footing.

Just at this instant a human figure appeared in view directly above him, and Cortinas' shout directed all eyes at this personage. Seen in the flickering firelight indistinctly, he presented a terrible picture.

The enemy that now confronted Rodriguez was a gigantic Apache, with his face painted vermillion, and his body streaked with black. Around his neck was the glistening shape of a snake, and scores of dried rattles, strung upon cords and secured about his person, struck each other as he moved, and gave out a sharp noise that was not altogether unlike the warning of the rattlesnake.

Those who gazed, spellbound, knew they were looking upon Hobamocco, the Snake Devil of the Apaches.

Only for a brief time were they allowed to gaze upon the formidable being; then a sharp snap was heard; some shining object shot through the air and fell upon the form of Rodriguez.

There was a howl of terror, and the valiant Mexican was seen descending the cliff a dozen times as fast as he had climbed upon it.

When he had gained the ground, the man threw himself upon the earth at the feet of his leader, and uttered cries of chilling import. Then Cortinas felt his flesh creep, for around the neck of the terrified wretch were the glistening folds of a huge rattlesnake, whose hollow fangs were buried in his throat.

Cortinas was the first among them all to recover himself. Perhaps this was only because the loathsome serpent had detached itself from his writhing victim, and was gliding toward him.

"Kill the accursed reptile!" he shouted, drawing his sword, for the guerrilla chief pretended to be a military man.

A slash of the bright weapon, just as the rattlesnake threw itself into a coil and drew back to strike, severed its head completely from the body.

At this moment a harsh laugh was heard, and looking up they saw the Snake-Devil still standing on the ledge, and glaring down upon them.

"Shoot the fiend!" cried Cortinas, almost beside himself with rage.

Another horrible laugh, a rattle of the dried snakes' heads and tails, and the huge Apache vanished from view just as a dozen rifles and escopetas were raised to take his life.

Then all eyes were turned upon the dying wretch, whose cries were so pitiful that even the brazen cheek of Cortinas paled.

"Where is Pedro, the snake charmer? Let him do something for this poor wretch, or else in pity blow his brains out," cried the chief.

But Pedro could do nothing. The man who could charm snakes into a stupor, and whose own body could be made impervious to their poison, was incapable of saving this stricken wretch. He knew nothing of the simplest remedy, that of applying hartshorn to the wound and to the tongue.

Fainter grew the terrible cries, until at last all was still.

"He is dead; and comrades, we live to avenge him!" said the harsh voice of Cortinas, who was leaning upon his sword blade.

"Venganza!" (revenge), muttered many a dark-featured *caballero*, and fierce glances were bent upward toward the fatal ledge.

CHAPTER IX.

A MAD DASH FOR THE BARRANCA.

"Follow me for your lives!"

When Mexican Mose uttered these words, his comrades knew that he had conceived some project for their deliverance from the rushing, roaring avalanche of fire that was swiftly approaching the spot where they had stood.

They had not the remotest idea as to what this plan of escape comprehended, but Mexican Mose was a man of action, and possessed more than a usual amount of good sense, so that it would be safe to trust to his guidance.

It was a thrilling spectacle.

Four men racing like mad over the prairie, while with incredible swiftness, and fanned to a fiercer fury every second, came the mighty tornado of scorching fire.

They ran as never men ran before; so it seemed to them. In such circumstances men often bring to light hitherto unsuspected powers, and Little Buckskin, who had never considered himself a fast runner, surprised both his comrades and himself by the rapidity with which he got over ground.

The prairie was lighted up almost like day in the strong night breeze; but there was a dead calm all around our four hunters.

All at once the old sharpshooter gave utterance to a cry that told that he had made a discovery. His keen eyes had discovered the rough line upon the prairie that bisected their course.

"The water-course; the *barranca*!" he ejaculated.

Then the other two understood what a happy thought had darted into the mind of their leader. Between a mile and a mile and a half from the hills, they had crossed a stream that came from the mountains.

If they could only reach that they would be saved. Life lay before them, death was crawling steadily on their rear.

How those men did run! Place such a terrible alternative before any man, and he will accomplish wonders.

Fast as they are running, their pace seems like so many snails compared with the flight of the fire-fiend in their rear.

Now they are close to the black, snake-like line, but the great billows of flame are horribly near.

Destruction rides in the wind, and black desolation follows in his wake.

They have now reached the edge, and safety seems assured. Mexican Mose disappears, clambering quickly down the side of the *barranca*. Old California Joe follows with the speed of the wind.

Blue Bill, panting, comes to a halt on the edge. He has heard a cry ring out above the roaring of the flames, and shading his eyes with his hands, he turns in spite of the terrible heat, and looks for his comrade.

Great Heaven! Little Buckskin has fallen, and is too exhausted to rise. His last atom of strength has gone out with that wild cry. There he lies some twenty feet away, with the grass already on fire around him, by the advance couriers of the conflagration.

May Blue Bill's name ever be remembered by all lovers of daring.

He never stops to count the chances, but dropping his rifle into the *barranca*, springs like a tiger to where Little Buckskin lies, picks him up in his arms as though nerved with the strength of a giant, and dashes on again once more.

His hair is singed, his clothing smoking, when he reaches the edge. The fire is back of him, around him, before him, over him; the very air seems to blaze as though impregnated with oil.

There is no time to clamber down the side as his comrades have done; Blue Bill sees the sheen of much water by the bright light thrown around him. With Little Buckskin still clasped in his steel-banded arms, he leaps from the edge, and in less than five seconds the avalanche of fire skips over the *barranca*, and goes humming and roaring on its way as though growling at being cheated of the human victim that had seemed so certain.

When Blue Bill thought he saw water below him, he was not wrong. Fortunately for himself and Little Buckskin, it happened that at the point where they struck the *barranca*, the little mountain stream met an obstacle in the shape of large rocks and dirt fallen from the sides, so that before the creek could once more go on its way it had to form a pond some five feet or more in depth.

Into this the two trappers plunged, and perhaps there was never more satisfaction experienced by the sufferers who leaped into the pool of Bethsaida in the olden days, for the cure of diseases, than was felt by our two trapper friends.

The daring leap served a double purpose, for while it saved them from the savage flames, the cool water acted as a balm to their hot flesh, and extinguished the several incipient conflagrations that had already started upon their persons.

Little Buckskin was wonderfully revived by the immersion, and he was even ahead of Blue Bill in crawling out of the pool and on to the rocks where Mose and Joe stood, slapping vigorously at various portions of their anatomy, for the fire had been close enough to give them a taste, so it can be imagined what Blue Bill experienced.

They presented a forlorn appearance, two of them wet and burned in several places, and with their hair singed. Blue Bill silently thanked Heaven he had his face muffled during that terrible rush to where his comrade lay, which was the only thing that saved the long, drooping mustache.

The others were not much better off, and from that quartette some fervent curses went up to be recorded against the Apaches.

Such a race they never had in all their lives, nor such a close shave to roasting. Indeed, Blue Bill declared they might as well have been fried at once as parboiled.

Little Buckskin uttered no word of thanks, but he had silently taken the hand of the daring ranger at the great risk of his own life, and lifting it to his bearded lips, actually kissed it.

Words could not express an iota of the deep feeling in

his heart; when the opportunity came for deeds, then Little Buckskin would show there was nothing in the world that he would not do for gallant Blue Bill.

"What are we to do now?" asked California Joe. "Buckskin's rifle is gone up, and we all look like a lot of singed rats. If them reds should sight us now, we could skeer 'em ter death. What's the move, Mose?"

"I reckon we'd better git out of this place first. It's served us a good turn, I grant, but it's too much for me. Climb up the wall, Joey. Can't go quite so fast as ye came down. Careful, now, it's dark as Egypt again after the light."

Old California Joe mounted slowly and laboriously, for the wall was slippery. Thsy could see his body outlined against the sky, and no sooner had he reached the top than he quickly drew back, and then his voice came to them.

"Hist! the reds are close at hand. They're s'archin' fur our bones with torches. Boys, we're in fur another tough time. Whoop!"

CHAPTER X.

THE BATTLE ON THE BURNT PRAIRIE.

WHEN Old California Joe uttered that last exclamation, he lost his hold upon the edge of the wall, and came tumbling down.

Perhaps it was fortunate for the old warrior that his comrades were below and looking up, for they managed to catch him in their arms, and in part break his fall.

"Climb up an' see," growled the old fellow, beginning to feel pretty well bruised.

They hastened to do as he advised, and their first glance over the top did not tend to reassure them any. A dozen torches or more were flitting about over the prairie, those most remote seeming like stars in the darkness that had again settled upon the land with the absence of the fire.

The savage Apaches, wishing to make sure of the matter, were looking for the charred bones of their supposed victims, and in a few minutes, failing to find them, they would search the *barranca*.

"Great guns!" exclaimed Blue Bill, in a shrill whisper, "the whole prairie seems alive with the reptiles. We'd better be making tracks out o' this rather sudden, for they're loping towards us now."

It was in truth just as the dashing ranger declared. As if some of the Indians had suddenly bethought themselves of the *barranca*, and determined to investigate it, several of the leading torches advanced rapidly.

Our friends could see the dark bodies of the redskins back of the lights, and they were even close enough to disclose the short, quick step they took, drawing up their feet on account of the hot ground.

The four men hastily drew themselves out of the *barranca*. Once more Mexican Mose was placed in the lead. Every second was priceless to them if they hoped to get away without being seen, and yet they dared not move rapidly for fear of some accident.

Far away in the northeast could be seen the whirling mass of fire, still riding in its might over the prairie, and licking up every combustible object in its greed.

The Indians were close upon them, and a discovery could hardly be avoided; not that the reckless scalp-hunters cared very much for this, but in their present dilapidated condition they would have liked to repair damages before entering upon another scrimmage.

In pite of their efforts to avoid it, discovery came. A cry from the Indians, and a momentary halt, told that they had come across the remnants of Little Buckskin's rifle, dropped when he stumbled and fell.

This was sufficient to tell them that they were on the right track, and like bloodhounds they leaped forward to the brink of the *barranca*. Then the torches were held close to the ground, and the Indians ran along, their eyes

readily discovering the footprints left by the scalp-hunters in the soft burnt soil.

The trailers were now being tracked.

"No use, comrades," growled Mexican Mose, "we must give them a dose of cold lead. My blood's on fire now, and I'm going to play the devil in these parts yet. Stand ready to repel boarders!"

A dozen seconds went throbbingly by, counting by the heart-beats of the men who stood so calmly at bay, after all they had gone through. The Apache dogs were now almost upon them. Half-a-dozen carried the glowing torches, and there were dark bodies behind these that told of others.

Something seemed to tell one of the leaders that all was not right, for suddenly he straightened his form, and his keen black eyes detected the four scalp-hunters.

His cry of alarm had hardly rang out before Old California Joe's deadly rifle drowned the shout, and the fellow who had given utterance to the yell threw himself upon the ground, unmindful of the hot burnt prairie soil, or the fact that his torch was thus covered by his body.

Nor were the others slow in following the example set by the sharpshooter, and a terrible commotion ensued among the Apaches. Those who held torches, and whom the bullets of the whites had left unscathed, hastened to hurl the blazing pine-knots far away, fearful lest they should prove the means of their destruction.

Thus darkness once more came upon the scene, and our friends could no longer see their red foes, nor the latter those whom they had just trailed to their cost.

The four scalp-hunters were again hurrying over the prairie. They had been on the tramp for many days, but fatigue was a thing none of them had known very often, and it would be the last thing to enter their minds when in such a situation.

By this time they had reached the terminus of the burned space, as they could tell even in the starlight, and had this been wanting, the feel of the soil would have betrayed the fact. There was a scant amount of grass beyond this line which would have burned, only that the ground was damp.

Upon the border of the fire district then, our four friends came to a halt. They had ran almost a third of a mile since the encounter with the Indians, but in such a noiseless way that their footsteps had not been heard by even the keen ears of the redskins.

Looking back they could see the torches scurrying about over the face of the prairie as though the Indians had either lost the trail, and were searching for it, or else having found it, were marshalling their forces in order to commence work.

"What next?" asked Blue Bill.

"Comrades," said Mexican Mose, who seemed to be stirred up by the fire into a regular dare devil, as he had been noted for being during the Mexican war—"comrades, those red dogs have chased me once too often. I've got wolf blood in my veins, and now I'm going to show 'em a trick we learned years ago to play on the greasers. I know ye fear nothing, boys, and that ye'll be with me heart and hand when I say that our hosses are going to come from them reds' camp. How d'ye stand that?"

"It's a bold move, but I'm with you, Mose, to the death," said Blue Bill.

"Count me in," from Joe.

"Don't leave me out, comrades," came in a hoarse whisper from the little ranger, who was as bold as a lion.

Losing no more time, they made direct for the glowing, steady light, which, seen through the smoke that was still arising from the scorched prairie between that portion of the timber-belt and themselves, they knew must be the camp-fire of the Indians.

Straight as the arrow flies, they made their way towards the spot. The rifles had been reloaded, and were capable of once more doing deadly execution.

The nearer they drew the more certain did they become in regard to the character of the light, and presently they could distinguish the forms of horses between themselves and the fire.

Their advance now grew more cautious, as it would spoil all their plans to meet with discovery thus early in the game. The Indians had had some fun at their expense, and now the tables were turned.

It was found that the miscellaneous animals, consisting of some thirty mustangs, together with five horses that had been captured from the whites from time to time, were quartered in a rude corral made of rawhide ropes that were stretched from tree to tree.

From this place, therefore, they would have to obtain their coveted horses. Whether there was a guard over the animals they could not have any means of guessing, but it was easy to suppose that this was the case, as these horse-Indians are very jealous of their mounts.

Mexican Mose submitted his plan, and it was agreed to unanimously, for, in truth, there could not have been a better under the circumstances. Two of them were to secure a couple of steeds apiece, and when all was ready the others would cut the leather ropes, and then when all had mounted, they would stampede the whole herd.

The daring entailed in such an undertaking may be better appreciated when it is understood that the camp fire around which sat a dozen Indians hideous in their war-paint, shed its light over the corral, and that while those who mounted first would have to lay low upon the backs of the horses, any unusual stir among the animals would be apt to draw attention from the redskins.

If four men could be found upon the border who could carry such a scheme to a successful fruition, our scalp-hunters were the ones. Years of experience amid the dangers that are to be encountered in the wilds of the far west had inured them to scenes of danger, where a nervous movement might be the means of precipitating death, and there was not a man among the four, even after their terrible experience with the prairie fire, but whose hand was as steady as a rock as they started upon their proposed horse raid.

Little Buckskin and Blue Bill had been detailed to secure the stock, while the others stood ready to pour in a deadly fire among the Indians should discovery come before they were ready for it, and when the horses were secured, these latter were to use their knives upon the leather ropes.

The two men crept up to the corral and crawled under. They were now among the horses. Some of these were genuine Indian mustangs, such as hate a white man almost as much as their masters do, and these began at once to snort and make other signs of alarm and fear.

Without losing any time, Blue Bill picked Little Buckskin up and placed him upon the back of a black horse. There were half a dozen of these still carrying halters, which fact went to prove very clearly that they had come from some white man's stable not long before.

The little ranger squatted down as though he was a part and parcel of the horse, and in a dozen seconds, his comrade had thrust a second halter into his hand.

Blue Bill had spent years of his eventful life among horses, and was well acquainted with their ways. Still the Indian mustangs created such a racket that it was probable the camp would be alarmed, and whatever he intended doing, must be speedily accomplished.

To leap up on the back of one horse and seize the halter strap of another was but the work of a few seconds. A loud outcry proclaimed the fact that they were discovered. At this instant, Mose and California Joe cut the ropes and sprang upon the horses the others had provided for them.

It was a general stampede.

Away went every animal in the corral, out upon the prairie, trampling down those who dared to oppose their progress, and scattering in all directions. Those of the

Indians who were looking with torches for the hunters, listened in amazement, but the truth was speedily made clear, for high above the clamor arose the triumphant shouts of the rangers, as they thundered away toward the canon, up which Cortinas and his gang of silver seekers had passed hours before, as they had penetrated deep into the mountains.

CHAPTER XI.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER.

"COMRADES, if we don't git out of this place quicker'n chain lightnin', something will happen in less'n five minutes."

It was the shivering coroner who made this declaration, and his three friends looked at him in surprise.

"What in the devil doee mean?" growled Tender-hearted Mose, who was feeling his throat to see if it was dislocated.

"Just this: I killed that demon's brother not six months ago. He don't know me, but the colonel does, and as soon as the fiend with the tails hears who I am, he'll be back here like a flash, and I reckon when his hand's in he'll lay ye all out. I don't want the chance of sitting on myself, and you can stay or go, but I'm going to—Oh, Heavens, there he is," and the scared coroner's teeth began to rattle like castanets, but it was a false alarm.

When this became apparent, he once more regained some little courage, and picking up what things belonged to him, unmindful of his wounded arm, he hastened to retreat up the mountain side, casting a longing glance toward the corpse of Hungry Mouth, as though the ruling passion of his life was strong upon him even in this moment of danger, and he regretted losing the chance of an inquest.

The three other men hastened to follow his example, for they had no desire to face Coon Tail Bob in an angry mood. Five minutes later they had reached a point upon the mountain side that commanded a view of their late camp, where the fire still burned dimly.

Even as they stopped to look, the coroner uttered a low cry and caught Texas by the sleeve. A man whom they easily recognized as the coon-tail hunter, had bounded into the circle of light. He was speedily followed by a gaunt, yellow hound, a cross evidently between a wolf and a blood-hound, and possessing the savage qualities of both.

He turned to speak some words to the colonel. Then, looking up, he evidently saw the four men above, for, shaking his rifle above his head, he uttered a shout and sprang into the bushes as if in pursuit, quickly followed by the huge dog and the soldier.

"Great beeswax, they're coming, boys. Save me, for Heaven's sake, save me from that man," groaned the demoralized coroner.

"I'm going to git," remarked Tender-hearted Mose, decidedly, "and if ye choose to stay thar and be gobbled up, all right; it's none o' my funeral. Texas, air ye with me?"

"You bet, ole hoss; I don't like the looks of that coon-hunter. We'll have to kill the kernal among these mountings by a bullet in the back. Them's the ticket," said Texas.

"Upon consideration, I too will mount higher into the lofty realms of space, from whence the eagle soars into the etherial hights," and the rhetorical professor finding himself alone, broke off in his highfown language, gave one hasty glance of alarm down the mountain side, and hurried away in the wake of the wretched coroner.

They might have securely hidden themselves one hundred yards from the spot, and those who were supposed to be in pursuit would not have found them, such was the rocky nature of the ground, and the darkness that lay upon the face of all nature; but Tender-hearted Mose and his comrades feared the rising of the moon, which would surely

betray them should they remain in their present situation. Onward they stumbled, seeing and hearing nothing of their pursuers. Over all manner of obstacles they made their way, sometimes finding themselves upon an elevation with a sea of inky darkness around them, and anon plunging down the side of the declivity.

Tender-hearted Mose led the way, and he seemed to possess the eyes of an owl, for he saw things that the others could not, and several times he brought them to a halt on the edge of a chasm, over which they would have gone otherwise.

The moon peeped above the rough line that represented the horizon. At first her smiling face shone between two great crags that served as the walls of a natural canon, but by-and-by she wheeled into full view, and her silver rays frosted every object upon which they fell.

In front stretched a gloomy valley where the moon had not yet entered, and on the opposite side there arose cliffs beside which those around them sank into insignificance, and which for rugged grandeur were sublime.

Tender-hearted Mose had stepped forward to see whether they could descend the rocky height and enter the bowl-like, cliff-surrounded valley, when he uttered an exclamation that brought the others to his side.

Down in the valley, near the other side, a fire burned brightly, and near it human forms could be seen moving to and fro. This was not the most singular part of the scene, however. A dozen men were crawling laboriously up the face of the cliff, and from where Mose and his comrades stood they looked like huge black spiders flattened out against the rocks.

"What does it mean?" said Texas.

"If you want the problem solved on scientific principles, I can readily show you how in this instance our vision deceives us. The object strikes the retina of the eye, and becomes inverted. They illustrate this popular fallacy —"

"Go hang yourself, professor, or we'll do it for ye," growled Moses.

"As I was remarking when this heathen interrupted me," continued the undaunted man of science and the dead languages, "to illustrate this popular fallacy, you have only to take —"

"Professor!" remarked Texas, drawing his bowie-knife deliberately.

"Sir," responded Demosthenes Jones, his respect increasing with the inches of the blade.

"I ask you calmly and deliberately, do you want to die? As an American citizen I am bound to help ye as much as lies in my power, an' somehow when I hear ye talk like that it seems to me that ye want to kick the bucket, an' that if ye don't, ye ought to be made to, and I tell ye on

my honor I'm going to tackle ye if ye say another word that ain't to the pint in an hour. Now, Mose, give us your opinion o' them crawlers."

The professor was dumb, for he had a healthy respect for the Texan desperado.

Mose declared that those upon whom they were gazing were Mexicans, for he could distinguish the flowing serapes of the climbers. He also gave it as his candid opinion that the easiest way of finding out the truth would be to make their way in that direction.

This they could easily do, as the rocky elevation on which they stood seemed to gradually merge into the shelf toward which the Mexican climbers were making their way.

It was speedily decided to do this same thing, for these desperadoes were possessed of a certain amount of reckless courage, and as a rule looked with contempt on all Mexicans. Besides, their curiosity was excited by these strange actions on the part of the climbers. This was a dangerous country, and these men must have some strong motive in coming here and risking their lives.

Away went the four bravos over the rocks, led by Mose. The moonlight, while not being extraordinarily bright, illuminated their way enough for them to avoid falls that would have been unpleasant, to say the least.

Gradually the path they were following, and which seemed to be clearly defined upon the rocks as though trodden many times—this path merged into a wide ledge, and the giant wall, totally inaccessible as it seemed, reared itself on the right.

The brigand chief could not prevail upon his men to climb upwards until the moon made her appearance. They had several starts, but turned back each time, declaring that the risk was too great.

At length the moon showed her smiling face, and Cortinas himself led the cliff climbers. It was a task of time, and the guerrilla had to pause to rest several times.

When at length he reached the ledge, a short distance to the right of where the Snake Devil had stood, and drew himself upon the rock, he found himself confronted by four men. With a savage Mexican oath Cortinas was about to spring upon them like a tiger, when the leading man pronounced his name. Texas and he were old comrades on the trail, and the guerrilla was glad to have an addition of such strength to his daring little band, while the quartette of ruffians on their part were eager to join forces with the silver seekers. Beside them yawned the black mouth of the cavern that led to the fabled mine with its fabulous deposits, and all they had to do seemingly was to enter and take possession.

Will be concluded in "Wide-Awake Library" No. 337, entitled: THE HUNTERS OF THE SILVER TRAIL.

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